



THE LONG
WAR BETWEEN
FRANCE AND
ITS ARABS

The
French
Intifada

♦

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AUTHOR OF PARIS:
THE SECRET HISTORY

The French Intifada

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To Carmel
With all my love as always
More than ever

And to my parents John and Doreen
Dawn, Gas, Leila and Gaby
Love to the whole tribe

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‘These are not natural events;
they strengthen from strange to stranger.’

The Tempest, Act V, Scene 1

Introduction

'Fuck France!'

In the late afternoon of 27 March 2007, I was travelling on the Paris metro, heading home after a day's work in the east end of the city. I got off at the Gare du Nord to change trains. In a trance – lost in the music on my headphones – I automatically made for the shopping mall which connects the upper and lower levels of the station. This was where I would normally buy a newspaper and a coffee and then catch a train south to my flat.

But this was no ordinary evening. As I walked up the exit stairs I could smell smoke and hear shouting. The corridors were a tighter squeeze than usual and everyone a little more nervous and bawdier than the average rush-hour crowd. As I got nearer the main piazza of the mall, smoke stung my eyes and nostrils, and the shouting grew louder. I could see armed police and dogs. Still, they didn't seem to be too much to worry about. My only real fear was how to get through the tide of commuters, which by now had come to a dead halt, and on to my train home.

I pushed my way through the crowd, burst into the empty piazza, and found myself in dead space caught in a stand-off between two battle lines – on one side police in blue-black riot gear, drumming their batons on their clear, hard shields, and on the other a rough assembly of kids and young adults, mainly black or Arab, boys and girls, dressed in hip-hop fashion, singing, laughing, and throwing stuff. You could tell from their accents and manners that these were not Parisians; they were kids from the *banlieues* – the poor suburbs to the north of Paris, connected to the city by the trains running into the Gare du Nord. One African-looking kid was swinging an iron bar and shouting. The bar crashed into a photo booth and a drinks machine. A few yards further on, a fire had been started in a ticket office.

The atmosphere was strangely festive. Behind the reinforced steel and glass of the Eurostar terminal, new arrivals from London were ushered into Paris by soldiers with machine guns – the glittering capital of Europe now apparently a war zone. They looked on the scene with horror. But it was exhilarating to watch kids hopping over metro barriers, smoking weed and shouting, walking wherever they wanted, disobeying every single one of the tight rules that normally control access to the station. It was also frightening, because these kids could now hurt you whenever they wanted. They had abolished all the rules, including the rule of law.

There is no word in French or English which expresses the opposite of the verb 'to civilize': the concept does not exist. But this was *anti*-civilization in action – a transgression of every code of behaviour that holds a society together. Like a terrorist attack or a football riot, the act of anti-civilization is a total experience: it undermines everything all at once. This is not an intellectual concept; it is a feeling. These kids were taking on the whole world around them – the police, the tra

authorities, passers-by – wrecking the station, the shops and the offices. And they knew exactly what they were doing.

I stumbled back into the pack of commuters, all transfixed by the spectacle of real, raw violence. No one spoke much. There was nervous laughter but everyone was frightened too. No one could say where this was heading, or where it was going to end.

In fact, the battle went on for another eight hours. I walked most of the way home and then watched the news reports on French television. With the shots of helicopters, flares and paramilitary troops, these seemed like dispatches from the front line of a distant war rather than an early-evening riot in a commuter railway station only twenty minutes away. And yet the journalists' demeanour was mainly calm and unsurprised. This was a level of violence that would have shaken most European governments, but here in France the incident seemed unremarkable, even banal.

Over the next few days, I read the press. Most reporters and eyewitnesses agreed on the chronology. At half past four in the afternoon, a young Congolese man, already known to the police, had been arrested while trying to dodge the ticket barrier. The arrest was heavy-handed and as the cops started hammering the guy, passers-by waded in to support the underdog. Guns were pulled out, batons drawn and soon enough a riot was in full swing.

But how did this happen? What made the Gare du Nord such a powder keg that the arrest of a ticket dodger could, within minutes, make it the most ungovernable part of French territory? This is where the interpretation of events became confused. In the pages of *Le Parisien*, the chronicle of daily life in the city, the events were described as '*une émeute populaire*' (a popular riot). The tone was one of mild approval. *Le Parisien* is not particularly left-wing, but it is always on the side of the 'people' that most cherished of Parisian myths. This language placed the events at the Gare du Nord in a long tradition of popular uprisings in the city – from the days of La Fronde through to the French Revolution and the Commune, these have been a defining feature of Parisian history. Several other newspapers, including the right-wing *Le Figaro*, reported the same facts with a shiver of horror, adding that the crowds had been chanting '*A bas l'état, les flics et les patrons*' ('Down with the state, the coppers and the bosses'), thereby domesticating the riot as part of the Parisian folklore of rebellion.¹

But the problem was that none of these accounts was true. The kids I saw didn't give a fuck about the state or the 'bosses'. Most of them didn't have jobs anyway. And although they did hate the police, they would never have used an old-fashioned slang word like *flics*, which belongs to the Parisian equivalent of the Krays' generation. For the rioters, the police were either *keufs* or *schmitts*. The chanting I heard was mostly in French: '*Nik les schmitts*' ('Fuck the cops'), and sometimes in English: 'Fuck the police!' But there was another slogan, chanted in colloquial Arabic, which seemed to be the hardest of all: '*Na'al about la France!*' ('Fuck France!'). This slogan – it is in fact more of a curse – has nothing to do with any French tradition of revolt.²

* * *

These days France is home to the largest Muslim population in Europe. This includes more than ten million people from North Africa, the Middle East and the so-called 'Black Atlantic', the long slice of West Africa which stretches from Mali to Senegal. A short walk around the Barbès district in northern Paris, where almost all of these nationalities are represented in the same tiny, overcrowded space, provides both a vivid snapshot of the diversity of this population and a neat lesson in French colonial

history.

The Gare du Nord, at the heart of this district, is frontier territory. It is the dividing line between the wretched conditions of the *banlieues*, the suburbs outside the city, and the relative affluence of central Paris. It is where young *banlieusards* come to hang out, meet the opposite sex, shop, smoke, show-off and flirt – all the stuff that young people like to do. Paris is both near and distant; it is a few short steps away, but in terms of jobs, housing, making a life, for these young people it is as inaccessible and far away as America. So they cherish this small part of the city that belongs to them.

This is why the Gare du Nord is a flashpoint. The area is generally tense but stable: everyone is in the right place, from the police to the dealers. But when the police come in hard, it can feel like another display of colonial power. So the battle cry of ‘*Na'al about la France!*’ is also a cry of hurt and rage. It expresses ancestral emotions of loss, shame and terror. This is what makes it such a powerful curse.

The rioters at the Gare du Nord or in the *banlieues* also often describe themselves as soldiers in a ‘long war’ against France and Europe. To this extent, they are fighting against the very concept of ‘civilization’, which they see as a European invention. The so-called ‘French intifada’, the guerrilla war with police at the edges and in the heart of French cities, is only the latest and most dramatic form of engagement with the enemy.

This war began with Napoleon’s cynical aggression in Egypt in the early 1800s, marking the start of a French lust for all things Oriental that culminated in the acquisition – by force – of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco (the territories of the Maghreb). All of this was conducted in the name of the ‘*mission civilisatrice*’ (civilizing mission), the historical destiny of the French Republic: to export the universal values of liberty, equality, fraternity – to *civilize* the world.

In return, the spices, drugs, architecture, music and religion of the ‘exotic East’ were imported into France throughout the nineteenth century. This is when ‘Orientalism’ became a favoured motif in French art and literature. Poetry in particular came under the Orientalist spell; from Baudelaire and Nerval to Mallarmé, French poets dreamed of an East that they saw as sensual, sexual and outside the everyday demands of the modern capitalist world.

As France colonized the Arab world, the French government began describing itself as ‘*une puissance musulmane*’ (a Muslim power). As well as signalling that France would look after the interests of Catholics in Muslim countries, this meant in the first instance that France saw itself as the protector in the Middle East of Catholics and Muslims against the encroaching Protestants of the British Empire (it was on these grounds that France extended its powers in Syria and Lebanon in the 1920s). More recently, the term ‘*une puissance musulmane*’ has been evoked by a succession of French foreign ministers to buy goodwill in the Arab world by hinting at a shared mistrust of the United States and Israel (the French have never been afraid to invoke the spectre of anti-Semitism in their dealings with Arab states).

The real rivalry between Britain and France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was about commercial and political power. They sought to achieve their aims, however, in very different ways. The British were mostly interested in money and therefore mainly indifferent to the cultures of the ‘natives’ they colonized, subjugating them by force of arms when and if necessary. The French, in contrast, controlled their colonies by pursuing the ‘civilizing mission’, effectively seeking to make their subjects culturally French. Of course the French plundered where they could, but there was also an added strategic urge to extend the concept of ‘Frenchness’ across the world.

Furthermore, under the rigidities of the French educational system, there could be no argu-

about what this identity meant. The absurd end-point of this policy was Berber Muslim students in the hills of Algeria, who had never been to France, reading about their 'Gaulish ancestors'. The comedy soon turns tragic when this cultural cosh splinters individual identity; as we shall see, such psychological trauma is the key to understanding not just the killing-jar of Algeria but the entire French sphere of influence in the Arab world.

The subtitle of this book refers to 'France and its Arabs'. There is a deliberate emphasis on the sense of ownership that France has felt and still feels towards the Arab world. It is this ambiguous relationship – which has more in common with a dysfunctional family structure than with colonialism in pursuit of profit – that shapes the story and explains present-day tensions.

In November 2005, eighteen months before the riot in the Gare du Nord, the tensions in the *banlieues* had again spilled over into violence and, for one spectacular moment, threatened to bring down the French government. The catalyst was a series of confrontations between immigrant youth and the police in the Parisian *banlieue* of Clichy-sous-Bois. As the fighting between police and the *banlieusards* intensified, riots broke out in major cities across France. This was when the term 'French Intifada' was first widely used by the media and by the rioters themselves.

The violence began on 27 October 2005, when two young men were electrocuted while trying to escape police by fleeing through an electricity substation. This incident was followed by almost a week of rioting every night, during which thousands of cars were burned. Then it began to spread to other French towns and cities. President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency, effective from midnight on 8 November. This gave the government and police special powers of arrest, the power to order a curfew and conduct house-to-house searches. But this only seemed to intensify the situation. On 11 November there was a blackout in part of Amiens when a power station was attacked – to the alarm of the police, this was to become a common and effective tactic. Churches were also firebombed.

The riots finally subsided after two weeks. But this was no easy victory for the police – quite the opposite in fact. The violence was partly fuelled by aggressive police tactics and by the belligerence of Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister of the Interior, who declared 'zero tolerance' and said that he would clean the streets of '*racaille*' (scum). Such inflammatory words only served to increase anger in the *banlieues* – it was clearly the language of war. By the end of November, with the French government in disarray, the riots across France had demonstrated that the youth of the *banlieues* could take on the authorities whenever they wanted to, and win. Since then the troubles in the *banlieues* have been sporadic but have never gone away.

The events of 2005 inevitably provoked an almost ceaseless flow of articles, books and debates in France. For all the noisy rhetoric, however, there were several important points of consensus on the Right and the Left. First of all it was generally agreed that the severity of the crisis had been exaggerated by the English-speaking media, who knew little of France and used the news of the French riots as a distraction from their own problems with immigration and immigrants in their own countries. This is, of course, the traditional role of the perfidious Anglo-American world in the French imagination.

Secondly, there was broad agreement that the riots had little or nothing to do with Islam or the historical French presence in parts of the Islamic world. Leftist intellectuals, in the pages of *Le Monde* or *Libération*, fell over themselves to distance the riots from any connection with the same anger that radicalized Islamists. According to these journalists, the riots were caused by a '*fracture sociale*' and

lack of *'justice sociale'*. Even the French intelligence services, the Renseignements Généraux, joined in, producing their own report, which described the riots as a 'popular insurrection' and downplayed the role of Islamist groups and the immigrant origins of the rioters. In this way the riots of 2005 were domesticated and made part of a traditionally French form of protest. There was an almost complete denial that what was happening might be a new form of politics that was a direct challenge to the French state.

There is, however, a very real conflict in contemporary France between the opposing principles of *laïcité* and *communautarisme*, which is being played out in the riots. The term *laïcité* is difficult to translate; put simply it means that under French law it is illegal to distinguish individuals on the grounds of their religion. Unlike the Anglo-American model of the secular state, which seeks to hinder state interference in religious affairs, the French notion of *laïcité* actively blocks religious interference in affairs of state. This dates back to the Revolution of 1789 and is traditionally understood to be a way of controlling and disciplining the Catholic Church. The Dreyfus affair, which led to the formal separation of church and state in 1905, is still held up as an example of why the Catholic Church needs to be policed in this way. As a specifically anti-religious concept, *laïcité*, it is argued, guarantees the moral unity of the French nation – the *'République indivisible'*.

In recent years this core value of the French Republic has been opposed by *communautarism*, which sets the needs of the 'community' against the needs of 'society'. Again, the loose Anglo-American model, where 'difference' – whether of sexuality, religion or disability – is tolerated or even prized, does not apply in France, where 'difference' is seen as a form of sectarianism and a threat to the Republic. The most acute problem for the recent generations of Muslim immigrants to France is that the proclaimed universalism of republican values, and in particular *laïcité*, can very quickly resemble the 'civilizing mission' of colonialism. In other words, if Muslims want to be 'French', they must learn to be citizens of the Republic first and Muslims second; for many this is an impossible task, hence the anxieties over whether Muslims in France are *musulmans de France* or *musulmans of France*.

But this conflict is not just about politics or religion. It is also about extreme emotions. More than death, most human beings fear annihilation. This is a process familiar to psychiatrists who treat patients for disorders such as schizophrenia and depression. Part of the process of mental disintegration which characterizes these illnesses is the experience of partial or total alienation. When a person loses all sense of authentic identity, all sense of self, to the extent that they don't feel that they properly exist, they then become literally strangers to themselves.

Historically this is what happened in France's territories during the colonial era and what is happening now in the *banlieues*. This is why it is almost impossible for immigrants to France from its former colonies to feel authentically 'at home' there. For all their modernity, these urban spaces are designed almost like vast prison camps. The *banlieue* is the most literal representation of 'otherness' – the otherness of exclusion, of the repressed, of the fearful and despised – all kept physically and culturally away from the mainstream of French 'civilization'.

* * *

This is an argument made by the political scientist Gilles Kepel in his 2012 book *Quatre-vingt-treize*, a title which alludes to Victor Hugo's great novel of the Terror of 1793, and to the notorious Seine-Saint-Denis district of Paris, which is known as 'Ninety-three', after its postcode. In his book Kepel

conducts a forensic examination of the recent history of this district, concluding that although several varieties of Islam are at war with each other, they are all united in their hostility towards the secular French state.

Kepel is also convinced that the one of the crucial conflicts in the *banlieues* is the challenge to the French Republic from the 'outside', by which he means both the *banlieues* and France's former territories in the Muslim world. Most importantly, unlike many of his peers, he sees the recent changes in French society as intimately connected to events in the Arab world which are little understood in the West. 'Many French political commentators are blind,' he told me in his cramped office just off the boulevard Saint-Germain. 'They do not want to see the world beyond France. And they do not understand that what happens here is because of our relationship with the Arab world, and our history there.'³

Kepel insists that the present tensions in France cannot be separated from the so-called 'Arab Spring' – the wave of rebellions which spread across the Muslim world in 2011. More specifically, the Arab Spring has led to a severe shake-up of all accepted truths about North Africa, which until now has normally been known to the world through French eyes.

None of this is straightforward. The Tunisian revolution of 2011, which sparked the Arab Spring, was hailed as a triumph by Tunisians in France. At the same time, as the régime was swept away, the true extent of French duplicity with the corrupt Ben Ali government was properly revealed. This, of course, only deepened the suspicion of Tunisians in France towards the French government, while in Tunisia there has been a growing number of Salafis (this is the word currently used for radical Islamists) who have specifically targeted France as their enemy. I saw this for myself on my last trip to Tunisia in 2012, when I spoke to Salafis who called for 'a new war of liberation' against France.

The mood is the same in Morocco and Algeria, where the unpopular governments reinforce their power with French arms and money. The largest section of this book is devoted to Algeria. This is not only because Algeria is the biggest country in the region – a potential regional superpower – but also because it is where the French fought an out-and-out war against a Muslim population. Although there was also strong resistance to the French presence in Morocco and Tunisia, it never reached the same level, and for this reason it is the spectre of Algeria, the memories of its bloody war with France which still figure most heavily in the French and Muslim imagination.

At the time of writing, as Syria collapses into carnage and chaos, it seems as if the Arab Spring may well become the 'Arab Holocaust'. The French, of course, do not want this to happen, but as they struggle to maintain order there is growing disorder in their own *banlieues*; the anger and violence are matched and mirrored on both sides of the Mediterranean.

This is the view of the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, who gave a controversial interview in the immediate wake of the riots to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*,⁴ in which he made the more nuanced point that the rioters were rising up against 'France' rather merely protesting for social reform. The interview was reported in *Le Monde* and suddenly Finkielkraut became a hate figure for the Left. He was denounced in *Le Nouvel Observateur* as a 'neo-reactionary' and even accused in other quarters of serving Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National and inciting racial hatred.⁵

I discussed this claim with Finkielkraut, who dismissed it as obvious nonsense. But what it did reveal was the barely veiled anti-Semitism which still contaminates French political discourse on the Left as well as the Right – it was implied or argued that because Finkielkraut comes from a Jewish background he has a vested interest in provoking divisions between France and its Arabs. (Kepel

too, has been frequently attacked for his alleged ‘Jewishness’.) This usefully blurred the argument that Finkelkraut was making: that there is a clear distinction between protest and sedition. According to Finkelkraut, the rioters were burning schools and institutions of the state ‘not because they had been thwarted by an uncaring society’ but because they had declared war on the state. This, he says, is the true voice of the rioters and it must be listened to as the real preliminary to any political response. Most importantly, he says, they do not see themselves as victims but rather as agents of history. This is why they describe themselves as ‘soldiers’.⁶

* * *

Writing any history of France is to enter an arena of conflict and confrontation. The French have very fixed ideas of what historiography is or should be and are extremely wary of an Anglo-Saxon challenging or subverting these ideas. A history of France and its Arab colonies by a non-French writer is, following this logic, doubly contentious.

One of the key arguments put forward in this book is that the abrupt and sudden break-up of the nineteenth-century European empires following the Second World War will have a defining effect on the twenty-first century. Until now most historians have focused on the Second World War as the key event of the past hundred years. The number of books on Hitler, Churchill and Stalin that appear on the bestseller lists each year testifies to the lingering fascination with the political and cultural schisms of this period. Similarly, the Cold War – which historians now sometimes refer to as the Third World War – is considered the significant conflict of the post-war period.

This book, in contrast, is a tour around some of the most important and dangerous front lines of what many historians now call the ‘Fourth World War’, from the *banlieues* of France to Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, and back again to the *banlieues* and the prisons of France. This war is not just a conflict between Islam and the West or the rich North and the globalized South, but a conflict between two very different experiences of the world – the colonizers and the colonized. It is necessarily a war of shifting frontiers, elusive enemies and ever-changing tactics, because of the ambiguous complicity that defines this relationship under the colonial order. The process of decolonization is dangerous because it is fraught with these ambiguities and psychological conflicts. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in Algeria, which is still experiencing the endless trauma of a nation in mourning for the loss of its parent figure.

The recent histories of Morocco and Tunisia have been defined by fear of Algeria and the French. Both countries gained their independence in the late 1950s, and although Tunisians and Moroccans sympathized with their Muslim brothers and their struggle, they were worried that the Algerian conflict would spill over into their territory. They were also terrified that, should this happen, the French would be provoked into the kind of massive military action that was taking place in Algeria. (Although the conflict was known at the time as the ‘secret war’, the rumours of torture and massacre by the French were common currency in Tunis and Rabat.)

The same fears have lingered on through the 1990s to the present day. During the years of the Second Algerian Civil war, Algerian borders were closed and the only traffic was smuggling contraband or people. In 2007 al-Qaeda du Maghreb established its North African base in Algeria, declaring that Tunisia and Morocco were ‘infidel states’. Meanwhile, France has retaken its position as the dominant economic power in all three countries.

The tension in this region has barely eased since 1957, when the French built La Ligne Morice (the

Morice Line, named after Defence Minister André Morice) – a fence which ran for hundreds of kilometres from the Tunisian border with Algeria down to the Sahara and the Moroccan border. This was an incredible if sinister feat of military engineering which was matched only by the Maginot Line, the doomed wall which the French built along the German border in the run-up to the Second World War. The Morice Line was electrified and along its length it was strewn with the pathetic corpses of sheep, dogs, goats, donkeys and shepherds.

Despite its enormous expense and the hundreds of French troops who manned its checkpoints, the Morice Line simply did not work. Algerian rebels quickly learned how to use wire-cutters and it was in any case an impossible task to police the Sahara. The barrier only succeeded in making Algerians feel as if they were living in a massive concentration camp, while their fellow Muslims were prevented from helping them. The same emotions are alive today in Ramallah and Gaza, and it is the feelings of imprisonment and exclusion that flare up in the French *banlieues*.

The specific aim of this book, then, is to examine the major role that French colonial wars in North Africa have played in the worldwide process of decolonization. Torture, collective killings and ethnic cleansing were all deployed by the French in North Africa as weapons of war. On the Muslim side, insurgency, terrorism and assassination were legitimized as tools against the European oppressor. From this point of view, this book becomes the new story of an old nation whose identity as the world capital of liberty, equality and fraternity is at every step challenged and confronted by antagonism with its cultural opposite – the secular Republic against the politics of its dispossessed colonial subjects.

From this dual perspective, my argument will be that France was not – as most French historians like to think – the sole agent of history during its colonial period, but that the countries of the Maghreb also had a direct influence on the twists and turns of French history. And that this process, largely ignored by contemporary French intellectuals, still continues in the *banlieues*.

However much the French media or intellectuals try to reduce the problem to familiar domestic issues, the fact is that France itself is still under attack from the angry and dispossessed heirs to the French colonial project. As long as this misunderstanding persists, the ‘long war’ will endure: ‘*Na’abouk la France.*’

Andrew Hussey, Paris, 2011

Part One

STATE OF DENIAL

Murder in the Suburbs

A few short months after I had watched the riots at the Gare du Nord in 2007, on a cold evening in late November, I left my flat in southern Paris, took the metro to Saint-Denis, a suburb to the north of the city, and then a bus to an outlying council estate, or *cit *, called Villiers-le-Bel. The journey took little more than an hour but marked a sharp transition between two worlds: the calm centre of the city and the troubled *banlieue*.

'*Banlieue*' is often mistranslated into English as 'suburb', but this conveys nothing of the fear and contempt that many middle-class French people invest in the word. In fact it first became widely used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to describe the areas outside Paris where city dwellers came and settled and built houses with gardens on the English model.

One of the paradoxes of life in the *banlieue* is that it was originally about hope and human dignity. To understand the *banlieue* you should think of central Paris as an oval-shaped haven or fortress ringed by motorways – the *boulevards p riph riques* (or *le p riph*) – that mark the frontier between the city and the suburbs or *banlieue*. To live in the centre of Paris (commonly described as *intra-muros*, within the city walls, in language unchanged from the medieval period) is to be privileged even if you are not particularly well off, you still have access to all the pleasures and amenities of a great metropolis. By contrast, the *banlieue* lies 'out there', on the other side of *le p riph*. The area is *extra-muros* – outside the city walls. Transport systems here are limited and confusing. Maps make no sense. No one goes there unless he or she has to. It's not uncommon for contemporary Parisians to talk about *la banlieue* in terms that make it seem as unknowable and terrifying as the forests that surrounded Paris in the Middle Ages.

The *banlieues* are made up of a population of more than a million immigrants, mostly but not exclusively from North and sub-Saharan Africa. As the population of central Paris has fallen in the early twenty-first century so the population of the *banlieues* is growing so fast that it will soon outnumber the two million or so inhabitants of central Paris. The *banlieue* is the very opposite of the bucolic *sub-urban* fantasy of the English imagination: for most French people these days it means threat, a very urban form of decay, a place of racial tensions and of deadly if not random violence.

The day before I set off for Villiers-le-Bel, two teenagers of Arab origin had been killed at Ixelles-Tolinette, one of the toughest parts of this tough neighbourhood, after their moped crashed into a police checkpoint. They had been on their way to do some rough motocross in an outlying field. No one in the area believed that this was an accident but rather a *bavure* – the kind of police cock-up that regularly ends with an innocent person dying or being injured. Within an hour gangs of youths pulled

up their hoods, covered their faces with scarves and went on to the streets to hurl petrol bombs and stones at the police. A McDonald's and a library were burned down. Streetlights were smashed or taken out so that the only light came from the flames of burning cars. The mayor of Villiers-le-Bel, Didier Vaillant, had tried to negotiate with the gangs but retreated under a hail of stones. A car dealership was set alight. By daybreak as many as seventy policemen had been injured. President Sarkozy, in Beijing, was alerted to the fact that a small but significant part of French territory was beyond control.

By the time I arrived in the *banlieue* the next day, the scene was set for another confrontation. 'See how they treat us like fucking *bougnoules*,' said Ikram, a young man of Moroccan origin who lived nearby, pointing at the police lines that were blocking access to certain areas. *Bougnoule* is a racist French term for Arabs that is as offensive as 'nigger' and dates back to the Algerian War of Independence, 1954–1962, when the French military used torture and terror against Algerian insurgents. The term *bavure*, meaning a police fuck-up, also comes from the same period. (The most infamous *bavure* was the so-called Battle of Paris, in October 1961, when a skirmish on the Pont de Neuilly between demonstrators and police led to a riot that ended with more than a hundred North Africans dead. Their bodies were thrown into the Seine by the police, under the orders of the Prefect of Police Maurice Papon, whose special brigades were known as 'les BAVs'. Papon had previously been involved in the deportation of Jews during the German occupation of the early 1940s but was not prosecuted for his crimes until the 1990s.)

At around 5 p.m. it was getting dark and the mood and atmosphere changed in Villiers-le-Bel. Drinkers in the café where I was sitting began smoking harder. Civilians – that is to say, non-rioters – were hurriedly leaving the scene and then, quite without warning, the area was occupied entirely by the police and their opponents. I watched as the gangs moved in predatory packs around the road, the car parks and the shops. I had heard on many occasions their stated aim of shooting a policeman. The rumour was that this time the gangs were armed, with cheap hunting rifles and air pistols. But the only weapons I saw belonged to the police.

Later, on returning to my flat and watching the surprisingly dispassionate television coverage of what was going on in the *banlieue*, I reflected that Paris had become hardened to levels of violence that, in any other major European capital, would have threatened the survival of the government. The French were used to violence, to mini-riots and clashes between police and disaffected youth. Even in my own neighbourhood, the quiet district of Pernety, armed police regularly sealed off parts of the *banlieue* adjacent to the RER railway lines (the RER is the fast commuter train that connects the *banlieue* with the centre of Paris). Across the city, there were regular battles with police at the Gare du Nord where an unnamed Algerian had recently been shot during another police *bavure* in the metro.

Outsiders

In the winter of 2007/8 I set out to learn more. I started by visiting the area around Bagneux, to the south of Paris. This is far from being the worst part of the *banlieues*: Courneuve and Sarcelles to the north are much more run-down and dangerous. These districts were portrayed in the 1995 film *La Haine*, in which a black, an Arab and a Jew, all from the *banlieues*, form an alliance against society. I found the film unconvincing, because I suspect that a Jew could never be friends with blacks and Arabs in this way. Also, although I know plenty of Jews in Paris, I don't know a single Jew who lives in the *banlieues*, even though at one time the Jewish community flourished in the suburbs – there a

still synagogues in Bagnolet and Montreuil which date from the 1930s.

Much more realistic, to my mind, were the intrigue and shocking violence of Michael Haneke's film *Caché* (2005). This is a story of murderous revenge in which a middle-class French intellectual is disturbed by memories from a deeply repressed and violent past. His fears are related both to his mistreatment of an Algerian child adopted by his parents and to his complicity as a Frenchman in the crimes committed by the French state against Algerians. *Caché* is set in the southern suburbs of Paris, not too far from Bagneux, the centre of which is much like any small French town. There is a church, a small market, cafés and green spaces. The architecture is not uniformly 1960s brutalism: there are cobbled streets and small, cottage-like houses.

The original meaning of *banlieue* dates back to the eleventh century, when the term *bannileuga* was used to denote an area beyond the legal jurisdiction of the city, where the poor lived. In the late fifteenth century, the poet and bandit François Villon described how Parisians feared and despised the *coquillards*, the army deserters and thieves who lived on the wrong side of the city wall. As Paris grew larger during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the original crumbling walls of the Old City, which marked the city limits, became known as *les fortifs* or *la zone*. This was marginal territory, with its own folklore and customs, a world of vagabonds, rag-pickers, drunks and whores. It was also the fertile ground that later produced street singers such as Fréhel and Edith Piaf, who dreamed and sang of *le Grand Paris* or *Paname* (slang for Paris), of the rich city centre only a few kilometres away from where they lived but which was as distant and alien as America.

In the 1920s and 1930s, as France began to industrialize rapidly, the population of the *banlieue* swelled with immigrants, mainly from Italy and Spain. The *banlieues rouges* (red suburbs), usually led by a Communist council, were key driving forces in the Front Populaire (the Popular Front), the working-class movement that swept to power in May 1936. This was the first truly left-wing government in France since the days of the Commune of 1871 (when a rag-bag of anarchists and workers' groups held the city between March and May), and its success changed France for ever, with the introduction of paid holidays, a working week of forty hours and the sense that, for the first time, the workers were in control. During the *trente glorieuses*, the period of rapid economic growth that occurred between the 1950s and 1970s, other major towns across France adopted the Parisian model of building estates far outside the centre. The first developments of the new *banlieues* were sources of pride to the Parisian, Lyonnais and Marseillais working class, who were often grateful to be evacuated there from their slums in the city centre. Once, long ago, the *banlieue* was the future.

I remarked on this to Kevin, a rangy black lad of twenty who, with his mate Ludovic (roughly the same age), was showing photographer Nick Danziger and me around Bagneux. 'I can't imagine this for anyone's future,' Kevin said, gesturing at the car parks and boarded-up shops. 'All anybody wants to do here is to escape.'

Both of them were obsessed with football, especially with the English Premier League. They were impressed that I had met and interviewed the French footballers Lilian Thuram, who is black, and Zinedine Zidane, who is from an Algerian family. Kevin himself was a footballer of average ability; he had a trial with Northampton Town in England. 'I hate France sometimes,' he told me. 'And, on other times, I just stop thinking about it. But the real thing is that here, when you are born into an area and you are black or Arab, then you will never leave that area. Except maybe through football, and even that is shit in France.'

I asked him about his English name. 'I like England. And, like everyone here, I don't feel French.'

so why should I pretend?’ Ludovic, who has a more conventionally Gallic name but is originally from Mauritius, joined in: ‘They don’t like us in Paris, so we don’t have to pretend to be like them.’ E ‘them’ he means white French natives – *Gaulois* (Gauls) or *fils de Clovis* (Sons of Clovis – one of the first kings of France) in the language of the *banlieue*.

It is this Anglophilia, transmitted via the universal tongues of rap music and football, which explains why so many kids in the *banlieues* are called Steeve, Marky, Jenyfer, Britney or even Kevin. They don’t always get the spelling right, but the sentiment is straightforward: *we are not like other French people; we refuse to be like them*. As we walked and talked we soon entered a dark labyrinth of grey, crumbling concrete. This was ‘Darfour City’, a series of rectangular blocks of mostly boarded-up flats where the local drug dealers gathered. The police call it a *quartier orange*, largely a no-go area for the police themselves as well as for ordinary citizens.

DARFOUR CITY was scrawled across a door at the entrance to a block of flats. As we wandered deeper into the estate, there was more graffiti, in fractured English: FUCK DA POLICE; MIGHTY GHETTO. Halfway down the street we were hailed by a pack of lads, all black except for one white. They were all smoking spliffs. These were the local dealers, a gang of mates who, according to Kevin, could get you anything you wanted. They delighted in selling dope and coke at wildly inflated prices to wealthy Parisians. They were pleased to hear that I was English. ‘We hate the French press,’ said Charles, who is thin and tall and of Congolese origin. ‘They just think we’re animals.’ They then looked at me with suspicion. ‘No one comes here who isn’t afraid of us,’ said another, Majid. ‘That’s how it should be. That’s how we want it.’ The gang tired of me and my questions and I understood it was time to go.

Modern Warfare

In January 2006 a mobile-phone salesman named Ilan Halimi, aged twenty-three, was kidnapped in central Paris and driven out here to Darfour City. Halimi, who was Jewish, had been invited out for a drink by a young Iranian woman named Yalda, whom he had met while selling phones. It turned out that it was her mission to trap him and lure him away from safety. Yalda later described how Ilan had been seized by thugs in balaclavas and bundled into a car: ‘He screamed for two minutes with a high pitched voice like a girl.’¹

Three weeks later, Ilan was found naked and tied to a tree near the RER station of Saint-Denis-Geneviève-des-Bois. He died on the way to hospital. His body had been mutilated and burned. Since being kidnapped, he had been imprisoned in a flat in Bagneux, starved and tortured. Residents of the block had heard his screams and the laughter of those torturing him, but had done nothing. Fifteen youths from the Bagneux district were arrested. They were members of a gang called the Barbarians, a loose coalition of hard cases, dealers and their girls, who shared a hatred of ‘rich Jews’. The alleged leader of the Barbarians, Youssef Fofana, went on the run to the Ivory Coast. He was later arrested and extradited and is now serving a life sentence in Clairvaux prison in the east of France. In the spring of 2012 he defied the French authorities by smuggling out from his cell videos in which he praises al-Qaeda and describes his capture as a ‘symbolic trophy for the Zionists of New York’. During his trial he described how he had doused Ilan in petrol and set fire to him with a cigarette lighter. He said he was ‘proud’ of what he had done.

Theories about the motives for the crime were initially confused. Was it a bungled kidnap? A *Clockwork Orange*-style act of pure sadism? Or was it the work of hate-fuelled anti-Semitism? The

police were, at first, reluctant to admit this possibility. But Yalda, who turned out to be a member of the *Barbarians*, said in her testimony that the gang had specifically told her to entrap Jews. Her confession was widely reported, as was the fact that she called Fofana 'Osama', in homage to Bin Laden.

At the same time, out in the *banlieues* themselves, the murder took on a skewed new meaning: the word was that what had begun as a heist and kidnap to extort a ransom from 'rich Jews' had become a form of revenge for crimes in Iraq and, in particular, for events at Abu Ghraib prison. Bizarrely, in the view of some, this transformed the torturers into martyrs – soldiers in the 'long war' against the white Western powers. The kids of Bagneux accordingly gloried in their own 'intifada'. They openly identified with the Palestinians, whom they saw as prisoners in their own land, like the dispossessed of the *banlieues*.

* * *

One afternoon back in central Paris, I visited the rue des Rosiers, the Jewish quarter at the heart of the Marais. This is like a little Tel Aviv, a place where French-Israeli waitresses, dressed in combat fatigues, serve up beer and schawarma. It was from here, during the occupation, that French Jews began the final journey to the death camps of eastern Europe or, closer at hand, to the Vél d'Hiv, the sports stadium to the south of Paris where, rounded up the French police and the German authorities, thousands died because of squalid conditions (there was no food and little sanitation: diarrhoea and dysentery arrived swiftly; death was not far behind). The cries of the dying in the stadium, like those of Ilan, were ignored by their Parisian neighbours.

In a coffee shop near the rue des Rosiers, a place owned by Moroccan Jews, I spoke to Myriam Bérrebi, herself a Tunisian Jew, about the killing of Ilan. 'I have never known such terror and anger in this neighbourhood,' she said, 'not since the shootings at Jo Goldenberg's Deli.'

She was referring to the massacre by Arab gunmen in 1982 of six diners at Goldenberg's, just across the street from where we were sitting. 'But, you know,' she continued, 'there were other echoes too – especially of the Nazi period, when Jews died and everybody pretended everything was all right.'

After the murder of Ilan, to the anger of many Parisian Jews, the Chirac government dissembled about 'social problems' in the *banlieues*. Only Nicolas Sarkozy, then an ambitious Minister of the Interior, whose mother was a Sephardic Jew, denounced the murder of Ilan as 'an anti-Semitic crime'. With Sarkozy's intervention the terms of the debate were changed. Was the killing of Ilan the isolated act of individuals, or was it a political murder in the largest sense: an act that expressed a collective hatred? Did it belong to individuals, or the whole community?

* * *

Despite the murders and the riots, good work is going on in the *banlieues*. I was discussing this with Hervé Mbuengué as we sat in his flat in Vache Noire, in what is meant to be a less impoverished neighbourhood of Bagneux. 'Good stuff happens in bad places,' I said. 'That is a very quaint idea,' he replied. 'Nowadays the *banlieue* only means one thing: trouble.'

Hervé's family is originally from Cameroon but he has lived in the *banlieues* all his life. He is educated and articulate, a graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and makes a living as a computer engineer. 'If you live here, if you speak with a *banlieusard* accent, you are condemned as an outsider in Paris and in fact in all French cities. It is a double exile – you are already an outsider because you

are black or Arab. But then you are an outsider because you are a *banlieusard*.'

Yet he has chosen to live here. 'The *banlieue* is my home. I cannot feel comfortable anywhere else.' Hervé's block of flats was rotten; the walls of the lift-shaft were falling apart on the inside. But his apartment was tidy and organized. This was a place where a full, hard-working life was being lived. His flat is the headquarters of Grioo, a website devoted to the African diaspora in France (*grioo* is a mild corruption of the West African term *griot*, meaning 'storyteller'). The success of the website is a testament to the positive side of the *banlieues*. The only taboo subject between us was that of the Jews. I had asked, innocently, why there were so few, if any, Jews left.

'They cannot live here,' Hervé said.

Hervé is not an anti-Semite but his remark reflected a shameful reality about the prevalence of anti-Semitism in the suburbs, a reality that makes even open-minded people like him feel awkward.

During several weeks exploring Bagneux, I chatted to hip-hop kids, footballers, football fans and self-proclaimed *casseurs* (wreckers, or rioters). I met and talked to them in cafés, at bus stops, shops and sports centres. It was mostly entertaining and enlightening; there is a lot of serious laughter and benign mischief in the *banlieues*. But the more time I spent there, the more I began to pick up on the casual references to synagogues, Israelis and Jews, like a secret code being revealed. The references would be refracted through the slang of the *banlieues*. So phrases such as *sale juif*, *sale yid*, *sale feuj*, *youpin*, *youtre* (this latter term dates from the 1940s and so, with its echoes of the Nazi deportations, contains a special poison), all racist epithets, were widely used. I heard all about the crimes of the Jews, yet it was hard to find anyone who had met a Jewish person. 'We don't need to meet Jews,' I was told by Grégory, a would-be rapper and Muslim from La Chapelle. 'We know what they're like.'

But that was the problem: nobody did actually know what 'they' were like. It seemed to me that hating Jews – like supporting Arsenal or listening to the rap band NTM – had become a defining motif of identity in the *banlieues*.

Hatred of the Jews: this is one of the oldest traditions in Paris, dating back, like the very notion of the *banlieue*, to the medieval period. In *Portrait of an Anti-Semite*, written in the wake of the German occupation of Paris, Jean-Paul Sartre was searching for an explanation for his compatriots' complicity in the crimes against the Jews. From a specifically French perspective, he describes the typical French anti-Semite as driven by his own sense of 'inauthenticity'² – a sense of existential and psychological unreality which at once challenges and undermines the anti-Semite's identity as a middle-class Frenchman. Unconvinced of his own true place in society, he none the less finds comfort in the reality of his Jew-hatred.

Anti-Semitism in France is a phenomenon of the political Left as well as of the Right, of the underclass as well as of the ruling élites. This in part explains, if it does not justify, the writings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the great chronicler of Parisian working-class life in the twentieth century. Céline hated Sartre. In response to Sartre's accusation that he had been paid by the Nazis to write anti-Jewish propaganda, Céline retorted with fury that he did not need to be paid to feel hatred for Jews: his hatred was authentic enough. Rather, it was his identity as a petit bourgeois, a member of a class forged in the late nineteenth century and already sinking into history, that felt unreal.

Céline describes the *banlieues* to the north of city as a kind of inferno. Rancy, the imagined suburb of his 1932 novel *Journey to the End of the Night*, is as dank and polluted as the Wigan described by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. But Céline's *banlieue* is infected by a particular kind

metaphysical misery: 'The sky in Rancy is a smoky soup that bathes the plain all the way down to Levallois. Cast off buildings bogged down in black muck. From a distance, big ones and little ones look like the fat stakes that rise out of the filthy beach at the seaside. And inside it's us!'³

Céline was a pessimist, obsessed by disease and filth. He saw no hope for the poor of the *banlieue*. In the end, he blamed nearly everything on the Jews. 'War in the name of the bourgeoisie was shit enough,' he wrote in one of his pamphlets, 'but now war for the Jews!... half negroid, half Asiatic mongrel pastiches of the human race whose only aim is to destroy France!' In recent years, Céline has become an inspiration for rappers in the *banlieue*, who admire his use of stylized slang and street language. The rapper Abd al Malik has devoted a song on his latest album to Céline. 'Céline revolutionized literature because he was very close to real people, like us rappers today,' he said in an interview on his blog. 'That's generally a good thing, but there's a danger about being so close to the people; you can start to embrace all the things that are wrong with society.'⁴

Today the literary heir to Céline as the chronicler of the Parisian underclass is novelist Michel Houellebecq. His vision of the *banlieue* is of a failed utopia, a district that has now reverted to wilderness. Houellebecq gives voice to this view in the novel *Platform* as the businessman Jean-Yves Espitalier muses on the rape of a female colleague by Arab and black youths on a 'dangerous railway line' between Paris and the *banlieues*. 'As he was stepping out of his office, Jean-Yves looked out over the chaotic landscape of houses, shopping centres, tower blocks and motorway interchanges. Far away, on the horizon, a layer of pollution lent the sunset strange tints of mauve and green. "It's strange," he said, "here we are inside the company like well fed beasts of burden. And outside are the predators, the savage world.'"⁵

Extremists

One afternoon I visited Jean-Claude Tchicaya, a black official in the *mairie*, the local town hall. I had read an interview with him in which he had spoken of knowing the murderers of Ilan Halimi. Tchicaya was dressed in a smart suit with a black leather gilet draped over his back. In his office, amid copies of *Jeune-Afrique* and *Libération*, there were portraits of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Wasn't it a contradiction to admire these 'heroes of peace' when the reality of the struggle for racial equality had also involved so much death and conflict?

'Struggle doesn't just mean violence,' Tchicaya said. 'It also means dignity.' I asked him how he knew the murderers of Halimi. 'This is not my milieu,' he said, 'but everyone in Bagneux knows everyone.'

Then I asked him if he knew the Tribu Ka, a group of black militants, resident in Bagneux, who had openly declared that they hated Jews and had issued messages in support of the Barbarians who had killed Ilan Halimi. 'Look,' Tchicaya said, 'all extreme situations create extremists. It's the pattern of history. But I don't want to know about those people.'

Out on the street, the Tribu Ka is in fact a hard-core political movement of black supremacists led by Kémi Séba, whose real name is Stellio Capo Robert Chichi. He was born in Strasbourg in 1981 in a first-generation immigrant family from Benin. Kémi was a clever, restless, angry young man who, at the age of eighteen, began his apprenticeship in radical politics with Nation of Islam's Parisian chapter, based in Belleville, the traditionally working-class district in the north-east of the city. Founded by Elijah Muhammad in the 1930s and now led by Louis Farrakhan, Nation of Islam has only a tangential relationship with 'authentic' Islam. It preaches that the black races are descendants of the

Tribe of Shabazz, the lost tribe of Asia.

Nation of Islam gave Kémi a cause and philosophy, but he was determined to lead his own political group. He travelled to Egypt in his twenties, and there he began to construct his own world view, a mix of Islam, black power and revolutionary politics. Kémites are the chosen race of God, or Allah, and will lead the black race out of slavery to their rightful position as masters of the world. The non-violent methods of Martin Luther King (a betrayer of the black race, according to Kémi) and Gandhi (an enemy of Muslims and agent of the British crown) are denounced as ineffectual.

Even when Kémi was imprisoned for five months, in 2007, for inciting racial hatred, he placed his faith in Allah and called himself a martyr. During his most recent prison sentence, in the jail of Bois d'Arcy, to the west of Versailles, until his release in late 2012, Kémi's blog was regularly updated on his website and his supporters spoke of his being *embastillé* (locked up in the Bastille).

The Tribu Ka are regarded as the real masters of the Bagneux. 'Those guys are mad fuckers,' I was told by Kevin, my guide through the *banlieues*. And they are having a discernible impact on France: if you are hassled by tough black kids in the Les Halles shopping centre in central Paris, they will often be wearing the Tribu Ka's colours of black, red and yellow, or the insignia GKS (Génération Kémi Séba). This is less than a kilometre away from the rue des Rosiers where, in May 2006, the Tribu Ka marched, chanting anti-Semitic slogans, and launched 'a declaration of war against Jews', which involved attacking anyone in their path with baseball bats. Two months later, they launched a raid to 'take back African treasures' from the new museum of colonial history at Quai Branly.

Tribu Ka are now banned, but Génération Kémi Séba is effectively the Tribu Ka, reinvented and well organized, but with a new media-friendly profile; on their website rappers such as ragga star Princess Erika and Orosko Racim of Ghetto Fabulous Gang profess their support. Another of Kémi's defenders is the mainstream black comedian Dieudonné, who was once as mild and inoffensive, and as popular, as the black British comic Lenny Henry. Now, Dieudonné is widely known for his virulent anti-Semitism.

Kémi's website continues to publish his speeches on the end of the white and Jewish races. He still lives in Paris and remains an accomplished public speaker and a master of double-talk. His interviews and speeches on YouTube are models of chilling self-righteousness, and he is seldom seen without two menacing guards at his side. Kémi has a variety of modes of dress, ranging from Afrocentric gear to suits in the style of Afro-American intellectuals of the Black Panther generation. For several weeks I tried to arrange a meeting with him. I was told by an intermediary that 'Kémi will speak soon. But he doesn't want to speak to the white press you represent. His time will come later. This will be when the white press is no more.' I was then told that they knew who I was and it might be wise to leave them alone. Or stay out of Bagneux.

'I understand Kémi,' I was told by a friend, a young black woman. She has a degree, a good job in publishing and a white boyfriend, who is a lawyer. 'Only if you are black or Arab in France can you understand the contempt people feel for you, and the hate and desire for revenge that this inspires in you. Kémi is nasty but I understand his appeal. He is about war and violence. What angry young man in the *banlieues* doesn't feel the same at some point? It's the same for the Taliban as for the youth in the *banlieues*: they are fighting to let us know that they exist and that they hate society as it is. They feel that the Jews rule the world, and from one point of view it can look that way. They see Iraq and Gaza and Rwanda and Kenya and the Jews of Paris or New York who have profited from their pain. To them, it all makes sense.'

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